

## CHAPTER 4

# Concept *Ahamkara*: Theoretical and Empirical Analysis

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## Introduction

Inquiry concerning human nature has centered on the fundamental question ‘who am I’. Attempts at answering this question have progressed in two distinct directions viz., inwardly through introspection and intuition and outwardly in terms of empiricism and intellectual understanding. While modern psychology has relied exclusively on empiricism and intellectual analysis, in the Indian tradition both the methods have been employed. The ancient *rishis* (seer-poets) dwelt on this issue extensively and made comprehensive attempts to arrive at a clear understanding of human nature and of self. They have made use of every conceivable method of arriving at the answer, which include observation (*avalokana*), analysis (*vichara*), dialogue (*samvada*), logical argument (*tarka*), inference (*anumana*), introspection (*antaravalokana*), intuition (*anubhuti*), testimony of scriptures (*shabda*) and testimony of realized persons (*apta vakya*). Quantification in the sense of subjecting information to statistical analysis is what is probably not done.

The answers obtained by *rishis* for the fundamental question ‘who am I’ are basically at two levels of awareness. First, a level at which the subject-object distinction operates, which may be called ‘empirical level’. This characterizes almost all of human experiences be it of ordinary waking state, of dream, of paranormal experiences, of pathological states, etc. Second, is a level at which the subject-object distinction is transcended. This characterizes what is usually referred to as spiritual or mystical and beyond comprehension for our ordinary waking consciousness. It may be called ‘transcendental level’. While most modern psychologists have limited their understanding and discussion of self and identity to empirical level and that too of ordinary waking state, the *rishis* have taken into account all possible human experiences and states in their discussion and explication of the human nature, of identity and self. They were ‘radical empiricists’ in Jamesian sense.

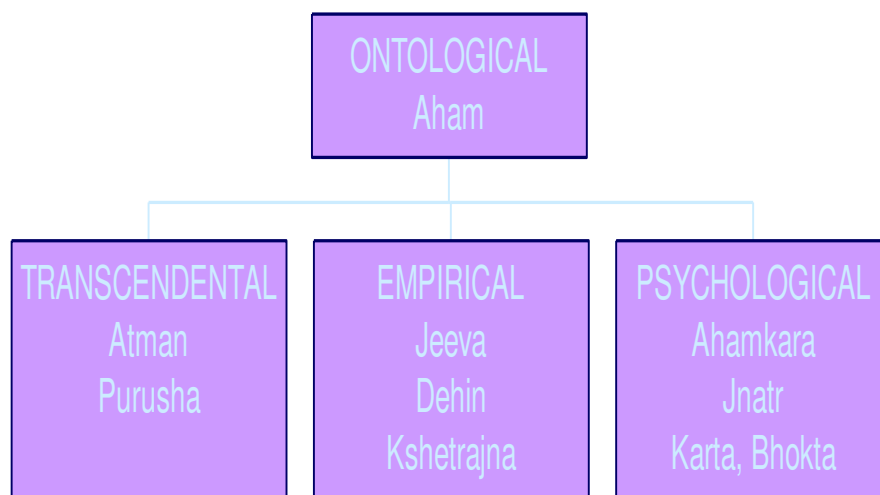
With this proposition, I set out to present this discussion on – *ahamkara* - an indigenous concept related to self and identity. Here an attempt is made to examine the concept *ahamkara* both from theoretical point of view and from empirical point of view. The basic theoretical framework for this presentation is Vedic and Upanishadic thought, though concepts from other systems are also referred to when necessary. For empirical analysis of the concept the data obtained from a series of empirical studies conducted by this investigator with the help of students, in the Department of

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Psychology, University of Mysore, over a decade is used. The implications of the findings for developing indigenous psychological perspective and for applied activity are discussed.

## Concepts related to self and identity in Indian thought

In the Indian tradition, the experience of personal identity or the self-sense is designated in Sanskrit as *aham*, which is equivalent to ‘I’ of English language. So, in the question ‘Who am I’, the I-feeling whose nature the questioner is interested in is *aham* and it is considered as a function of the mind or mental apparatus known as *antahkarana* (internal organ). The function is known as *ahamkara* and at psychological level it refers to all our day-to-day feelings and thoughts about ourselves. But *aham* is a generic term and it has been used to understand the nature of one’s self, both at empirical and transcendental level as mentioned earlier. Therefore, in the Indian tradition there are many concepts related to identity and self other than, *aham*. They are: *Atman*, *Purusha*, *Jiva*, *Dehi*, *Ksetrajña*, *Ahamkara*, *Ahambhava*, *Asmita*, *Jnata*, *Bhokta*, and *Karta*, which are used in different contexts with specific meaning and significance. For example, one may say I am *Atman*, I am *Purusha*, I am *Jiva*, and I am *Bhokta* and so on. *Ahamkara* is one such term, which means ‘I am the doer’ (*karta*). They may be understood as referring to ontological, transcendental, empirical, and psychological categories. A diagrammatic representation of the same is given below.



In the ontological sense, *aham* represents ‘being’. Hence, when the question is asked as to who this being is, in the first person as ‘who am I’, the answers differ and it has different referents depending on the level at which it is understood. In the transcendental level *aham* is referred to as *Atman* and *Purusha*. Since Upanishads declare that transcendent Self, *Atman* is identical with the highest principle of the universe, *Brahman*, (*ayam atma brahma*), Upanishads also declare that this self is *Brahman* or “I am Brahman” (*aham brahmasmi*). In an oft-quoted verse Sage Ramana Maharshi expresses this idea as follows:

*hrdaya kuhara madhye kevalam brahmamatram  
aham aham iti sakshadatmaroopena bhati hi  
hrdivisha manasa chinva majjata va*

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*pavana chalana rohdhatmanishtobhava tvam*

*Supplement to Ulladu Narpadu, sloka, 8*

“In the centre of the Heart-Cave there shines alone the one Brahman as the ‘I, I’, the Atman.

Reach the Heart by diving deep in quest of the Self, or by controlling the mind the breath, and stay established in Atman.”

“Reality in Forty Verses: Supplement. Stanza 8” In  
*The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi* (p.131).

The notion of transcendent Self, *Atman* requires further elaboration because it is beyond the distinction of subject-object. According to *rishis* transcendence is really *not* an ‘experience’ in the ordinary, non-ordinary and even extra-ordinary sense because, transcendence implies no experiencer or experienced. The transcendent state of consciousness, if it can be called a state at all, is itself called Self, *Atman*. Hence, the idea of self-sense here is not the same as the idea of self-sense of empirical level or its psychological referent and it is cogently articulated in Mandukya Upanishad as follows:

*“The Fourth (turiya), the wise say, is not inwardly cognitive, nor outwardly cognitive, nor cognitive both-wise; neither is it an indefinite mass of cognition, nor collective cognition, nor non-cognition. It is unseen, unrelated, inconceivable, un-inferable, unimaginable, indescribable. It is the essence of the one self-cognition common to all states of consciousness. All phenomena cease in it. It is peace. It is bliss, it is non-duality. This is the Self, and it is to be realized.”* (MU, 7, tran. Swami Sarvananda, 1976).

According to Mandukya Upanishad, *turiya* or so called fourth state of consciousness vis-à-vis the other three viz., *jagrat* (waking), *swapna* (dream) and *sushupti* (deep sleep) is the substratum of all phenomenal experience irrespective of the state. Hence, as one follower of Vedanta put it (personal communication) *turiya* is the original and real state and all other phenomenal states of consciousness including waking are altered states from Upanishad point of view. Thus, *turiya* is the ‘ground’ of awareness, on which waking, dream, deep sleep, and other experiences happen with a ‘subject-object/self-other’ duality as ‘figure’. Therefore, *turiya* was considered as the essence of the one self-cognition common to all the other states and was regarded as the Self to be realized – *sa atma sa vijneyaha*. It was the awareness of figure-ground distinction among *rishis*, as far as human experiencing is concerned, that was responsible for positing ‘ground awareness’ as the Self (*Atman*) ultimately to be realized as distinguished from the subject/self of phenomenal experiences of a dualistic realm.

*Aham* as self-sense, at empirical level is associated with *jiva* in classical texts. It is the association with *jiva* that is called *avidya* (ignorance of one’s true nature) or *ajnāna* (lack of transcendental Self-knowledge). The person who undergoes the cycle of birth and death is *jiva* and it is at empirical plane. It is also referred to as ‘*dehii*’ in Bhagavad Gita.

*vasamsi jeernani yatha vihaya navani grnhati naroparani |*

Bhagawad-Gita, II, 22.

Just as a human being casts off the worn out clothes and takes a new one,  
Similarly, owner of this body (*dehii*) gives up the worn out bodies and  
takes upon new ones. (Translation author's)

This 'subject/self' of phenomenal experience termed as *jiva* or *dehin* in the Indian tradition is incorporated into linguistic structure of many regions. The term *purusha* is also used in a pluralistic sense to refer to *jiva*, as distinguished from the Samkhya fundamental principle *Purusha*. Thus the concept of person or individual or self or subject is represented by three terms *jiva*, *dehin*, and *purusha* in the Indian tradition. Padmapada, the foremost disciple of Shankara, gives a definition of *jiva* as follows.

*And that Jiva-of the nature of 'not this' conditioned as ego in the waking and dream state; and conditioned in sleep by avidya which has within it trace of the impressions (that the inner sense has left behind) which is the opposition of Jnana and which obstructs the light (of Atma) - keeps going forwards and backwards and as such is termed in Sruti, Smrti in common parlance as Samasari, Jiva, vijnanaghana, vijnanatma, prajna, sariri, sarirah, atma, samprasadha, purusa, pratyagatma, karta, bhokta, and Ksetrajna. (Panchapadika of Padmapada XXXIV 135, Pp. 100-101. Quoted in Safaya, 1976, p. 213).*

In the above definition we find that different terms have been used to represent the different aspects of the self in a conditioned existence. The connotations of them are as follows. *Samsāri* – involved in worldly enjoyment and activity; *Jiva*- soul; *vijnanaghana* – embodiment of discriminatory knowledge with a spiritual dimension; *vijnanatma* – prime mover of discriminatory knowledge; *prajna* – self as cognizer; *sariri* – one who is embodied; *sarirah* – the equipment that which enables the Jiva to function in phenomenal world; *samprasadha* – the self-sense present in dream; *purusa*- human being; *pratyagatma* – self as Brahman; *Karta* - self as agent; *Bhokta*– self as experiencer/enjoyer/sufferer; *Ksetrajna* – Knower of the field.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the tradition emphasizes on delinking the self-sense from *jiva*. The *rishis* attributed all phenomenal experiences to *jiva* or *dehin* and regarded *Atman* as 'experience-less' as the term experience is understood with reference to an empirical subject. They used the term *anubhuti*, which has no equivalent in English instead of *anubhava*, which refers to phenomenal experience. The bone of contention between orthodox systems of Indian thought and that of Buddhism is whether such an experience-less *Atman* is a reality at all. The latter do not admit that possibility, i.e., of 'ground awareness' or *Atman*. This is one of the important contentious issues that psychologists have to address in future research.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful Sri. M. A. Narasimhan for clarifying the connotations of these usages.

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A layperson's understanding from his/her daily experiences is that whoever that 'experiencer' or the 'subject' who participates in all experiences during *jagrat* (waking state) is the real self. This includes our body, our mental states, and our social relationships. So we incorporate most experiences of *jagrat* as part of our identity or self-sense, and deny some of them into our self-structure which constitutes Freudian unconscious. Hence, a layperson's identity is bio-psycho-social. A layperson also usually treats experiences that occur during *swapna* (dream state) as not part of real self, (exceptions being certain tribal people – Tart, 1969) though at the time of dreaming its reality is no less than that of *jagrat* experience. Similarly, many other types of experiences that may happen to people are also rejected as unreal, figment of imagination, dream, hallucination, delusion, far fetched and so on. In other words, they are treated as non-self. Thus, whatever one tends to identify with becomes part of self and whatever one denies becomes non-self. Hence, non-self includes a vast domain of possible human experiencing.

The *rishis* recognized a vast domain of possible human experiences such as paranormal and mystical, unlike most modern psychologists, and provided detailed descriptions of such experiences. They also discussed dreams, illusions, hallucinations and delusions (Sinha, 1985). However, they went a step ahead of lay people and modern psychologists in their analysis of self and non-self. They declared that even the commonly understood real self of *jagrat* is also non-self and declared that only true self is that 'ground awareness', *Atman*.

Thus, the difference between most modern psychologists and ancient *rishis* can be summarized as follows. The former affirms a narrow range of human experience as real and self, and denies a vast domain as unreal and non-self. The latter declared all human experiences involving subject-object/self-other dichotomy as relatively real and are only 'figures' in the backdrop of a 'ground awareness', which is the only real and is Self and the rest as non-self. Hence, for them *jiva* (soul) or *dehin* (owner of the body) is also non-self and it is a wrong understanding to treat non-self as Self. This is *ajnana* (lack of transcendental Self-knowledge) and that leads to wrong identification with non-self - *jiva* or *dehin* instead of Self - *atman*, which is the root of human problems and suffering. Solution lies in first obtaining the right understanding of the distinction between non-self and Self called *viveka* (discrimination) through the process of listening to what *rishis* say (*sravna*) (in modern times includes other means of acquiring information) and reflection (*manana*). Then making a conscious attempt to overcome the wrong identification through a process of meditation (*nidhidhyasana*). Then a person becomes *jnani* (Self-realized). Therefore, in *rishis* scheme of understanding of self and identity, two processes play a crucial role. One is *viveka* (discrimination) and another is *vairagya*, the process of dis-identification or detachment.

## **Concept *ahamkara* – Theoretical analysis**

### **Classical Texts**

The question is who identifies with non-self, who has to make the discrimination between non-self and Self and who has to make the conscious attempt to dis-identify with non-self? The *rishis* posit *ahamkara*, regarded as one of the *anthakaranas* ("inner instrument", mind) as the one involved in this process. Safaya (1976) observes that different schools have used different terminologies to refer to

In K. R. Rao & S. B. Marwaha (Eds.) *Towards a spiritual psychology: Essays in Indian Psychology*. (pp. 97-122). New Delhi: Samvad India Foundation. 2005. what is called Mind, as distinguished from Matter. “Samkhya named it *anthakarana*, Yoga named it *citta* and Nyaya named it *manas* (*Buddhi* etc., including in the same). Vedanta calls it *anthakarana*, but enumerates distinctly the four aspects viz., *buddhi*, *manas*, *citta* and *ahamkara*” (p. 221-22). However, it is debatable whether the term *anthakarana* as used in Samkhya and Vedanta is generic in its meaning or refers exclusively to cognitive aspect requiring further research. On the other hand, *citta* of Yoga and *manas* of Nyaya are more generic in nature.

Schools differ in the number of functions included under *anthakarana*. Samkhya, which is generally believed to be the system that has introduced the concept, speaks of three evolutes of *Prakrti* viz., *Mahat* (*Buddhi*), *Ahamkara* and *Manas*. They are constituted of three *guna* viz., *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The three evolutes have a cosmological and a psychological aspect. Scholars have shown that almost all the concepts of classical Samkhya, as enunciated in *Samkhya Karika* of Isvarakrishna, have their origin in Vedas and Upanishads (Rao, 1966).

Samkhya describes the whole cosmic evolution with reference to the three evolutes and three *gunas*. However, the psychological aspects of the evolutes are regarded as *anthakarana*. As Rao (1966) has clarified, according to Samkhya *Buddhi* is only *adhyavasaya* or discriminating principle in general. It does not have any ‘individual’ or ‘egoistic’ touch about it. So at this level the *purusha* does not even feel that he is the enjoyer or sufferer. It happens to be the function or contribution of *ahamkara* to make the *purusha* strictly ‘personal’. Further Rao (1966) notes that self-consciousness or a feeling of personal identity cannot arise if the mental organ does not present something determinate to it. Though it is generally believed that it is a Samkhya concept, references to *ahamkara* is found in Chandogya and Prasna Upanishad also. In *Prasna Upanishad* (IV, 8 – Tr. - Subramanya Sharma, 1947) *ahamkara* is listed along with *buddhi*, *manas*, and *citta*. *Chandogya Upanishad* (VII, 25, 1&2 - Tr. - Sachhidanada Saraswathi Swami, 1956<sup>2</sup>) speaks about *ahamkara* as self-sense and points out that those who fail to discriminate between *atman* and body will confound the self-sense with the body.

Elucidation of the nature and function of *ahamkara* can be found in the *slokas* related to *Anthakarana*, *Aham-Padaratha-Nirupana*, and *Ahamkara Ninda* in *Viveka Chudamani* of Shankaracharya. Shankara defines *ahamkara* thus<sup>3</sup>: Sloka 103 states

<sup>2</sup> Yellambalase Subramanya Sharma after embracing Sanyasashrama was known as Swami Sachhidanda Saraswathi).

<sup>3</sup> *Anthakaranameteshu chakshuradhishu varshani ||*  
*Ahamityabhimanaena titshthyabhyasa tejasa || 103||*

*Anthakarana* itself dwells in the sensory and motor organs and in the body as *aham* with *abhimana* (*ahamityabhimanaena*) in the reflected brightness of *atman*.

*Ahamkaraha sa vijneyaha karta bhoktabhimaanyayam ||*  
*Sattvadiguna yogena chaavasthaatraya mashnute || 104||*

That itself is to be understood as *ahamkara*, which due to *abhimana* becomes *karta* (doer) and *bhokta* (enjoyer) and also due to its association with *sattva* and other *gunas* will have *avasthatraya* (waking, dream and sleep states)

(Translation of *Sloka* Author’s)

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that *anthakarana* itself dwells in the sensory and motor organs and in the body as *aham* with *abhimana* (*ahamityabhimanena*) in the reflected brightness of *atman*. Sloka, 104 states, that itself is to be understood as *ahamkara*, which due to *abhimana* (identification) becomes *karta* (doer) and *bhokta* (enjoyer) and also due to its association with *sattva* and other *gunas* will have *avasthatraya* (three states viz., waking, dream and sleep states). It is made clear that *ahamkara* experiences happiness and sadness in relation to favourable and unfavourable circumstances and therefore *sukha* (happiness) and *dukha* (sorrow) are its *dharma* and not of *atman* which is *sadananda* (forever bliss).

Shankara further makes a distinction between *ahamkara* and *ahampadartha* (VC Slokas 292-296). He equates *aham-padartha* with *atman* and elucidates it as the self-sense which remains even in deep sleep and which is witness even for *ahamkara* and other functions. Therefore, he exhorts on giving up *abhimana* (identification) in *mamsapinda* (body made of flesh) as well as in that *ahamkara* which has *dehabhimana* (bodily identification) and is fashioned out of *mooda buddhi* (dull intellect). Further, Shankara exhorts to give up *abhimana* (identification) in *kula* (caste), *gotra* (clan), *nama* (name), *rupa* (form) and *ashrama* (stage of life), which are dependent on living corpse (*ardrashava ashriteshu*). He also exhorts on giving up *abhimana* in the doer ship and enjoyer ship of *linga sharira* (subtle body). Thus, in modern terms, Shankara is exhorting to give up the sense of identity with bio-psycho-social and even psychical aspects of human nature, all of which constitutes *ahamkara*, in order to realize *atman* and attain *shanti* and to be *akhandananda*, inseparable bliss, itself

Thus, it appears that *abhimana* is the essence of *ahamkara*. Apte (1988) has listed different meanings of the term *abhimana*, one of which is “referring all objects to self, the act of *ahamkara*, personality”. Swami Rama illustrates this with a very lucid example – “when sensory-motor mind functions a ‘rose is seen’. But when *ahamkara* adds its influence, ‘I see a rose’ ” (Rama et al. 1976, p.70). So to see a rose an ‘I’ is not essential. Similarly, to experience life a feeling of self-consciousness is not essential.

According to Upanishads and Vedanta all the problems start when this non-essential factor adds its influence in our life. Therefore, *ahamkara* is bad and we find more *slokas* denigrating *ahamkara* (*Ahamkara Ninda*) (14 as against 3 describing its nature) in *Viveka Chudamani*. *Ahamkara* is looked down with following metaphors and descriptions (Slokas 297-310): It is *vikara*, *dushta*, *rahu*, powerful wild serpent, residue of poison in the body even after it is purged from a body, a thorn in the throat of a person taking food, an enemy to be slayed with the sword of *vijnana*, and fashioned out of *moodha buddhi* (dull intellect). Even after it is completely rooted out, if it is thought for a while, it sprouts hundreds of *vrttis* (mental modes). Even after it is completely controlled, it should not be given scope through sense objects. If it is given, it is like watering a withering lemon plant that will come into life.

### **Modern scholars and their interpretations of *ahamkara***

Some of the Indian psychologists and philosophers have described the nature of *ahamkara* in modern terms. Rao states: “The general consciousness which is undifferentiated and rudimentary in course of time gets individuated. It acquires a subjective frame of reference and the process of individuation is afoot. This state, a

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further development of the capacity to be conscious of objects may be designated as self-consciousness. The Samkhya theory has brought into currency, the expression “*ahamkara*” to denote this. This is a word which superficially signifies ‘I making’ (1962, p.41)”.

Srinivasan (1967) interpreting the views of *Vishishtadaivata Vedanta* of Ramanuja states thus. “*Ahamkara* is characterized by the contracted consciousness of the individual whereby he imposes on himself artificial and ego-centric ‘separative’ limitation, conceives himself as divided from ‘God’ and opposed to other individuals and lands himself in a state of struggle and suffering in the pursuit of selfish desires. This is the state of human bondage or inauthentic existence. Only by transcending this state of *ahamkara* can the true status of the individual soul be realized” (p.199).

Safaya (1976) notes that according to Samkhya *ahamkara* is the “Individuating Principle, responsible for limitations, separation and variety in the universe. It designates the state of active consciousness of ego. *Mahat* stands to *ahamkara* as consciousness to self-consciousness, for it is here that the subject-object differentiation in the living beings takes place. The development of the sense of objective world as perceived by the subject arises only through *ahamkara*. It arises through the preponderance of *sattva* in *mahat*” (p. 102).

Safaya (1976) also notes that according to Samkhya, with the development of *ahamkara*, the subject-object differentiation in living beings takes place. Joshi (1979) observes that through this process a false center is created around which one moves and becomes a subject of constant friction and irritation. Rama et al (1976) observe that the I-ness inherent in *ahamkara* “provides a sense of separateness from the rest of the world, a feeling of distinction and uniqueness. It is the agency, which defines what of the sensory data and memories is “I”. It is the property of subjectivity” (p.70). Ajaya (1983) notes that as the distinction between not-I and I rigidify, the human being comes increasingly under the illusion that this distinction is real rather than an artificial creation of the mind. This illusion limits the human being from experiencing the “holistic substratum of existence” (p.128).

### ***Ahamkara* and ego: Conceptual issues and problems**

In modern psychology due to non-recognition of the possibility of a transcendent Self, all the discussions on self terminate at the level of bio-psychosocial identity. Neither *Atman* nor *jiva* is accepted as real. Therefore, the notions like life after death, reincarnation, and transcendence are suspect. Engler (1986) notes that a classically trained psychoanalyst will have difficulty in appreciating the possibility of transcendence, because it involves going beyond the personal identity or ego which is the basis of healthy human functioning and thus implies psychopathology. This idea is reinforced by some studies on meditation, which show that those who have not achieved a reasonable amount of ego-integration are likely to breakdown due to meditative experiences (Boorstein, 1997). Hence, Engler (1986) made a statement that “you have to be somebody before you can become nobody”.

An issue of far reaching clinical significance that is debated in this context is whether attempts at transcendence lead to psychopathology. The position postulated here is that such issues are semantic in nature and they arise due to incorrect translation of concepts from one language to another. For example, the exhortation in



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Upanishads is only to lose *ahamkara* the sense of false identity in order to realize *atman* the true identity, not *vijnana* or *buddhi* that is the discriminating principle and which is very much required to understand the difference between *atman* and *anatman* (non-Self). What is emphasized in general in spiritual traditions is to go beyond the limited identifications, *but certainly not to lose those ego-functions*, which keep a person sane.

Freud and other early psychoanalysts used the concept ego to include both the identity sense and many other functions collectively referred to as secondary process thinking (Bellak et al., 1973). Bellak et al., (1973) consider sense of identity or self-sense (*ahamkara* in the Indian context) as one of the 12 ego-functions. It was only later that self-psychologists used the term 'self' to refer to the identity sense and retained the term ego-functions for many of the secondary process functioning (St.Clair, 1986). Hence, there is a need to understand and articulate the Indian and western concepts more sharply. Thus, the contention here is that the concept *ahamkara* and the concept self of self-psychologists are nearer to each other than the psychoanalytic concept ego-functions.

## **Concept *ahamkara* - Empirical analysis**

To examine some of these issues this author initiated a series of studies in the Department of Psychology, University of Mysore. A scholarship instituted during the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Department to encourage research on Indian Psychology came handy to motivate students to work in this area. Arachana Raj (1993), Shireen Gaur (1994), Rekha (1995), Pannaga K. Murthy (1999) and Parimala (2001) worked on this topic for Master's dissertation. In 2001 and 2002 Kiran Kumar collected data on large samples of students of University of Mysore and of Makerere University in Uganda<sup>4</sup>. The findings of the first study are reported elsewhere (Kiran Kumar & Raj, 1999).

## **Development of *Ahamkara* Questionnaire**

Based on the initial theoretical analysis (Raj, 1993) four aspects of *ahamkara* were identified viz., agency, identification, individuality, and separation. Agency represents 'I'-feeling as the agent of action, which includes sense of doership, sense of control and personal efficacy and also the one who experiences. Identification represents feeling 'I and mine', in terms of one's bio-psycho-social associations and attachments. Individuality represents feeling of uniqueness, with respect to developing unique traits and abilities. Separation represents the feeling of 'I and not-I', in terms of the degree of differentiation in terms of 'self-other' as manifested in experiences of personal boundaries or lack of it.

Initially, an 18-item version was developed with five items each for Identification and Individuality and four items each for Agency and Separation. Two Sanskrit scholars judged the items for their face validity and suitability in relation to four aspects. The first study was carried out on meditators and non-meditators

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In K. R. Rao & S. B. Marwaha (Eds.) *Towards a spiritual psychology: Essays in Indian Psychology*. (pp. 97-122). New Delhi: Samvad India Foundation. 2005. (N=60) (Kiran Kumar & Raj, 1999; Raj, 1993). Subsequently, Kiran Kumar added two more items one each for agency and separation components to make the number of items equal (five for each component) yielding a 20 items version. This version was tried out on male and female samples from a general population (N=63) (Gaur, 1994).

For both, the 18-item and the 20-item versions, a four-point scale was used with the alternatives always, often, sometimes and rarely and they were scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1. For some items the scoring was reversed to 1, 2, 3, and 4. The high score represented greater *ahamkara*. However, when the 20 item questionnaire was administered to a group of Psychology teachers who underwent a Refresher Course a common refrain was that the four alternatives was not sufficient and the 'never' category as an alternative is necessary. Based on the feedback five alternatives were adopted with a five-point scale 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1. This version was tried out on neurotics and normal subjects (N=60) (Rekha, 1995).

Subsequent careful analysis of the 20 items of the questionnaire revealed certain shortcomings. It was found that the items did not include unconscious expressions of *ahamkara*. Second, there were no items related to self-esteem. Third, the influence of Indian perspective regarding *ahamkara* lead to a negative view, i.e., as an obstruction for Self-realization. But, for an ordinary person it is the way of relating to the world and functioning. For these reasons, 30 more items were added to make it a 50-item questionnaire with five response alternatives. Further, during translation of the questionnaire into Kannada it was found the language of the items were more in the form of mere possibilities and did not reflect the actual experiences. Hence, the sentence structure of all the items were modified both in English and Kannada to make it more personally meaningful, and experience and action oriented by Kiran Kumar and Pannaga K. Murthy. This modified 50-item version was tried out on normal subjects (N=203) (Pannaga Murthy, 1999) and on meditators (N=96) (Parimala, 2001).

During 2001 and 2002, the author was involved in a collaborative research project with the investigators from University of Detroit at Mercy and Saybrook Institute, San Francisco USA on Multi-National Cross-Cultural Study on Expressions of Spirituality sponsored by Floraglates Foundation, USA. As part of this study the 50-item version of *Ahamkara* Questionnaire was administered along with other questionnaires, to Post-Graduate students of University of Mysore (N=800) and Graduate and Post-Graduate students of Makerere University, Uganda (N=500).

### **Development of Ego-function Questionnaire**

To compare the *ahamkara* concept with ego-functions, another questionnaire was developed based on the descriptions for 12 ego-functions and an Interview Schedule provided by Bellak et al., (1973). The 12 ego-functions are as follows. 1) Reality testing; 2) Judgement; 3) Sense of reality of the world and the self; 4) Regulation and control of drive, affect and impulses; 5) Object relations; 6) Thought process; 7) Adaptive regression in service of ego; 8) Defensive functioning; 9) Stimulus barrier; 10) Autonomous functioning; 11) Synthetic integrative functioning; and 12) Mastery competence.

In K. R. Rao & S. B. Marwaha (Eds.) *Towards a spiritual psychology: Essays in Indian Psychology* . (pp. 97-122).New Delhi: Samvad India Foundation. 2005.

The first version consisted of 57 items – Five items for functions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, and 11 each. Four items for functions 6, 7, and 12. The item contents were drawn from the Interview Schedule provided by Bellak et al., and rephrased in question format. A four-response alternative Always, Often, Sometimes, and Rarely was used and items were scored with a four-point scale from 4 to 1. Certain items were reverse scored. Raj (1993) tried out this questionnaire with the 18-item version of *Ahamkara* questionnaire.

Subsequently three more items were added and the question format of the items was changed into first person to keep a uniform pattern with *Ahamkara* Questionnaire. No change was made in scoring pattern. This revised 60-item version with five items each for 12 functions was tried out by Gaur (1994). Rekha (1995) tried out the 60-item version with five response alternatives, in tune with the change in response pattern for *Ahamkara* Questionnaire. Pannaga K Murthy (1999) and Parimala (2001) also used this version. Kiran Kumar administered it along with other questionnaires as a part of the Multi-National Cross-Cultural Study on Expressions of Spirituality to Post-Graduate students of the University of Mysore and to Graduate and Post-Graduate students of Makerere University in Uganda.

## Sample details

Table 1. The sample details of different studies.

Year	Researcher	Item version <i>Aham-kara</i> AQ	Item version <b>Ego- functions</b> EFQ	Response format	Sample Details	Age in Years
1993	Archana Raj	18	57	<u>Four</u> Always Often Sometimes Rarely	<b>N = 60</b> Meditators (30) Non- Meditators (30) 20 Males & 10 Females in each group	<u>Mean:</u> Meditators 37 Non- Meditators 38
1994	Shireen Gaur	20	60	<u>Four</u> Always Often Sometimes Rarely	<b>N = 62</b>  Male (31) Female (32)	20-50 <u>Mean:</u> Male 29 Female 35
1995	Rekha K	20	60	<u>Five</u> Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never	<b>N = 60</b> Neurotics (30) Normal (30) 13 Males & 17 females in each group	20-60 <u>Mean:</u> Neurotics 33.43 Normals 31.77

In K. R. Rao & S. B. Marwaha (Eds.) *Towards a spiritual psychology: Essays in Indian Psychology* . (pp. 97-122).New Delhi: Samvad India Foundation. 2005.

1999	Pannaga K Murthy	50	60	<u>Five</u> Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never	<b>N = 203</b>  Males (89) Females (114)	20-70
2001	Parimala N	50	60	<u>Five</u> Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never	<b>N = 92</b>  Meditators- short term (32) (M 22, F 10) Meditators- long term (32) (M 23, F 9) Non-meditators (32) (M 14, F 18)	<u>Mean:</u> M 32.9 F 25.5  M 41.8 F 47.9  M 45.8 F 32.2
2001	Kiran Kumar	50	60	<u>Five</u> Always Often	<b>Indian</b> students <b>N=770*</b>	**
2002	Kiran Kumar			Sometimes Rarely Never	<b>Ugandan</b> Students <b>N= 450*</b>	**

\* Valid data included for analysis

\*\*Analysis of this data is not complete and not final

### Analysis of data

1. The following analyses were done for different sets of data collected by students depending on the nature of hypothesis, using the techniques mentioned.

- Calculation of Reliability of AQ & EFQ —> Chronbach Alpha, Split-Half, Kuder - Richardson
  - Comparison of Groups —> t-test, ANOVA
  - Finding relationships between *Ahamkara* and Ego-functions —> Correlation
  - Reduction of data and grouping of variables —> Factor Analysis,
2. However, some of the data are reanalyzed using different factor analytic techniques like PCA, Principal Axis Factoring and Alpha Factoring
3. Analysis of EFQ data of Indian students and of AQ and EFQ data of Ugandan students is not done.

### Major findings and trends

What follows is a summary report of the important findings and trends that emerged out of different studies conducted on this issue and the findings which throw light on the nature of the concept *ahamkara* vis-à-vis ego-functions. They are reported in different sections.

### A. Reliability of different version of AQ and EFQ

- ❖ 18-Item Version *Ahamkara* Questionnaire is found to be highly reliable with Chronbach  $\alpha$  ranging between 0. 7 to 0.89 for total sample (N= 60) & sub-groups.

Reliability of 18 - Item *Ahamkara* Questionnaire

Sample	Chronbach $\alpha$
Total (N=60)	0. 8550
Meditators (N=30)	0 .7028
Non-Meditators(N=30)	0.8971
Male (N=40)	0.8569
Female (N=20)	0.8589
Age group	
19-44yrs (N=35)	0.8349
45-70yrs (N=25)	0.8674

- ❖ 20-Item Version of *Ahamkara* Questionnaire - Chronbach  $\alpha$  0. 6532 (N=60).
- ❖ 50-Item Version of *Ahamkara* Questionnaire - Chronbach  $\alpha$  0.3426 (N=203) and 0. 1747 (N=770).
- ❖ 57-Item Version of Ego-functions Questionnaire - Chronbach  $\alpha$  0.9052 (N = 60).
- ❖ 60-Item Version of Ego-functions Questionnaire-Chronbach  $\alpha$  0.9086 (N = 60).

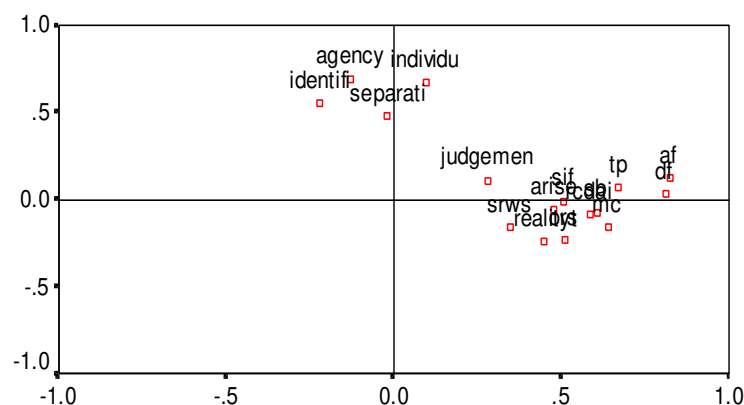
### B. Factor analysis of AQ and EFQ

#### Plot 1

1. Plot 1and Plot 2 are diagrammatic representation of the factor analysis of the scores obtained from 16 sub-scales of two questionnaires (4 of AQ and 12 of EFQ) on different samples. Plot 1 represents the results of 18-item

#### Factor Plot in Rotated Factor Space

##### 18-Item AQ and 57-Item EFQ



Factor 1

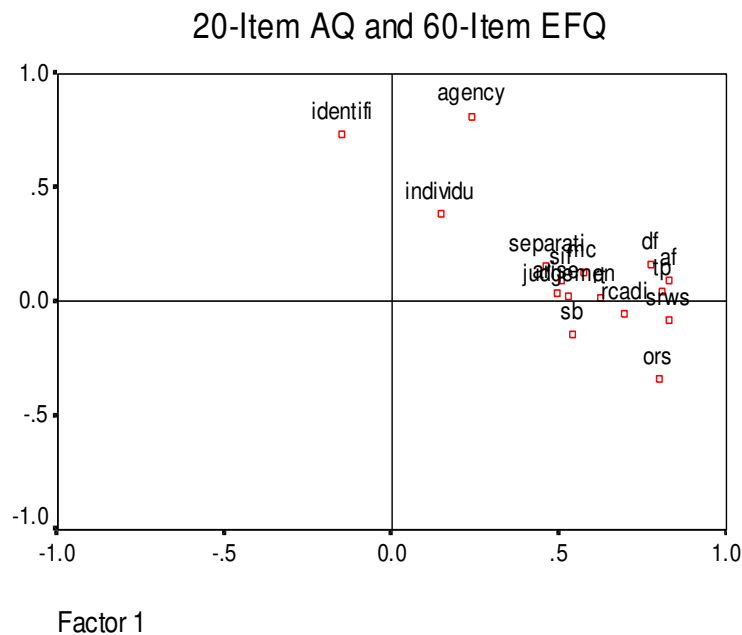
Factor 1 - Ego-Functions

Factor 2 - Ahamkara

AQ and 57-item EFQ. Plot 2 represents the results of 20-item AQ and 60-item EFQ (refer table for sample details).

## Plot 2

### Factor Plot in Rotated Factor Space



2. In both the factor analyses two independent factors emerged and Factor 1 represent Ego-functions and Factor 2 represents *Ahamkara*. All the 12 sub-scales of EFQ loaded on Factor 1 that accounted for the maximum variance. All the 4 sub-scales of AQ loaded on Factor 2. This clearly indicates that the two constructs ego-function and *ahamkara* are independent.
3. In previous analysis Identification and Agency scales of *Ahamkara* Questionnaire showed significant negative correlation with Ego-functions in one study (Raj, 1993) and Identification scale showed significant negative correlation with Ego-functions in two studies (Rekha, 1995; Pannaga K. Murthy, 1999). Thus Identification factor seem to be the most distinguishing aspect of *Ahamkara*.
4. As evident from both the factor plots (Plot 1 and Plot 2) among the four sub-scales viz., Agency, Identification, Individuality and Separation of AQ, which were conceived as components of *ahamkara*, Identification sub-scale is located in a quadrant opposite to those in which all the Ego-Function sub-scales have clustered. It means that Identification sub-scale does not share variance with the scales of Ego-Function Questionnaire and has nothing in common with them. Hence, it appears to be the single most marker of *ahamkara* construct and supports the previous analysis.
5. Identification sub-scale has items that imply attachment, association, and attractions. All of them indicate feeling of I and mine. In other words, *abhimana*. Emergence of Identification sub-scale as the marker of *ahamkara* construct in this factor analysis thus seems to validate the theoretical analysis of Shankara regarding the essence of *ahamkara* as

- abhimana*. Identification has emerged as the first principal component in a previous analysis also (Kiran Kumar and Raj, 1999; Raj 1993).
6. Study of group differences in previous analyses indicates that there are significant differences between groups in AQ scores. Gender difference was found in the *Ahamkara* scores. Males scored higher than females (Gaur, 1994). Gaur (1994) also found that there was no significant difference in the higher and lower age group subjects on *Ahamkara* scores, and between male and female within in age groups. Meditators scored less on AQ than non-meditators as found by both Raj (1993) and Parimala (2001). Normal subjects did not differ from neurotics in AQ scores, but differed significantly in EFQ scores (Rekha, 1995).
  7. It was also found that meditators had lower score on *Ahamkara* than non-meditators and differed in Identification and Agency, scoring significantly less on both of these aspects (Raj, 1993). In another study, also it was found that meditators had significantly lower score on *Ahamkara* than non-meditators and scored significantly less on Identification, Agency and Individuality (Parimala, 2001). On the other hand, neurotics differed significantly from normal subjects only in Separation with a lower score, though there was no overall difference (Rekha, 1994).
  8. Factor analysis of 18-item and 20-item version of AQ, for different groups does not show that items related to Identification sub-scale emerge as the first factor accounting for maximum variance. Instead a composite factor consisting of items from the three sub-scales Agency, Individuality and Separation has emerged as the first factor.
  9. Further, the number of factors and the order in which they emerge also vary from group to group (for example between meditators and non-meditators, normal and neurotics, male and female, etc.). The number of factors required for explaining the variance between **two different populations** such as meditators and non-meditators, neurotics and normal subjects, and male and female also differ. The number of factors remain same but the order of factors and the items which load on them vary across techniques due to statistical computational reasons
  10. Factor loading also varies in different population suggesting that different groups may be characterized by different components of *ahamkara*. This suggests that factor structure varies across population and hence, we cannot assume that the nature of *ahamkara* is homogenous. This explains the reason for group differences that have been reported.
  11. The factor analysis of one set of data (N=60) obtained using the 20-item Version with five response alternatives failed to replicate the factor structure obtained with 18-items Version.
  12. The factor analysis of two sets of data (N=203 & N= 770) obtained using the same 50-item Version with five response alternatives also failed to replicate the factor structure obtained with 18-items Version.
  13. It was also found that in 20-item and 50-item version the obtained factors varied across samples in their structure in terms of the items, which constitute them.
  14. Even in the factor analysis of EFQ a trend similar to what is found in *Ahamkara* Questionnaire was observed. Four factors emerged accounting for the 12 sub-scales. Ego-functions may be more important than *ahamkara* for mental health and general functioning as found in one study (Rekha, 1995). The ego-functions seem to have more conceptual

similarities with the theoretical description of another *anthakarana*, the functions of *buddhi*.

### Inferences

From the findings and the trends found from analysis of different sets of data the following inferences can be made.

1. Ego-function emerged as the first factor accounting for maximum variance, which means that people differ more with respect to ego-functions than *ahamkara*.
2. *Ahamkara* is a different construct than ego-functions and latter appears to be conceptually more similar to *buddhi*. There are indications that Identification component of *ahamkara* as measured in this study in terms of one's associations (*sanga*), attachments (*mamkara*), and attractions (*moha*) may represent the most important aspect of *abhimana* and thus validates the theoretical analysis of ancient seers and sages with regard to the essence of *ahamkara*.
3. The concept *abhimana* and Identification as measured here seem to be similar to Otto Kernberg's concept of internalization in his synthesized model of object relations theory and Freudian instinctual theory. The process of internalization has three levels: introjection, identification, and ego-identity which are progressively more conscious in operation (St. Clair, 1986). *Abhimana* seems to encompass all the three levels.
4. The factors Separation and Individuality of *ahamkara* also appear to be conceptually nearer to Margaret Mahler's concepts of Separation and Individuation. "Separation and individuation have two intertwined and complementary tracks. The track of individuation involves the evolution of intrapsychic autonomy, by which the child assumes the characteristics of being his or her own individual. The track of separation involves the child's emergence from the symbiotic fusion with mother, and therefore a differentiation and disengagement from her... (Mahler *et al.* 1975, 63 cf. St. Clair, 1986, p.106-107)".
5. Lack of uniformity in number and composition of factor structure indicate that people differ in terms of the composition of *ahamkara*. This may be due to variations in the **number of items, their wording, response alternatives and the samples** on which the data is collected.
6. It is possible to speculate that individuals may be differentially predominated by one or more components of *ahamkara*. One may have a greater *ahamkara*, in terms of uniqueness and individuality, another in terms of agency, a third in terms of one's attachments and identifications and a fourth in terms of the extent to which one feels separated from the others.
7. In other words, to use Sanskrit equivalents, one may be seeking *Vaishistya* (uniqueness and individuality), another may feel a strong self-sense as *karta* and *bhokta* (I am the doer and enjoyer) a third may seek self-sense in terms of associations, attachments, and attractions, *sanga*, *mamkara*, and *moha*. A fourth may feel a strong sense of boundary in *dvaita bhava*, separation in terms of self-other, with strong in-group – out-group feelings, strong likes and dislikes, etc. However, this can only be confirmed after ruling out the other possible psychometric reasons, for the obtained differences.



## Implications, Speculations and Conclusion

The findings have following implications for the development of theory of self and personality, psychopathology, psychotherapy and mental health and positive psychology from Indian perspective.

1. With the different components discussed above, the concept *ahamkara* can serve as a meta-construct which can embrace many of the modern psychological concepts related to self and identity, such as locus of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem, individuality, relational self, individualism - collectivism, ego-boundary, autonomy and many more. That means *ahamkara concept with its components delineated here appear to be parsimonious* and it is possible to understand contemporary theories of self and identity with reference to this meta construct.
2. It is possible to speculate that certain mental problems, particularly of neurotic kind and personality disorders as manifestations of under or over emphasis of one or the other component of *ahamkara*. For example, a Type A person who may have problems may be speculated to have agency component, *kartrtva*, over emphasized. Similarly, its under emphasis may result in a sense of loss of control associated with many disorders. While over emphasis on identification, *mamakara*, *moha*, *sanga*, result in all kinds of emotional problems and conflicts, under identification may lead to psychopathic and anti-social tendencies. Similarly, lack of *dvaita bhava*, feeling of self-other separation, may lead to an undifferentiated psychotic state and its rigidification may lead to obsessions, insulation, withdrawal, and the like. Hence, *there is scope to build an indigenous theory of psychopathology and psychotherapy from Indian perspective*.
3. On the healthy side is the emphasis on *vaishishtya*, uniqueness and individuality, which is required for self-actualization.
4. However, from *Indian psychological point of view*, experiencing any of the above four components in greater degree is dangerous. All of them reinforce one's bio-psycho-social identity. While modern psychotherapeutic methods emphasize their development, from the Indian point of view involvement in all of them is to be refrained from. *Kartrtva*, *vaishishtya*, *dvaita bhava*, *mamakara*, *moha* and *sanga* – all of them have personal involvement and investment, feeling of I and mine, which is *abhimana*. Hence, the *rishis* advocate detachment in all of them. Only then, one can experience the true identity. Looked at from this perspective, modern psychological attempt is to increase *abhimana* and thus *ahamkara* in the name of therapy and growth. While it is necessary to some extent for normal functioning, it cannot be the *ideal of growth from Indian point of view*. Here is the difference between growth and self-actualization of modern psychology and Self-realization of Indian psychology.

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